

Bobby Valdez

Summer Job Turns On Science Interest

On self-sufficiency, the French philosopher Voltaire said, “We must cultivate our own garden.”

That statement could easily apply to Bobby Valdez, a freshman at Texas A&M University in Kingsville, Texas. Valdez is a 19-year-old who is not afraid of hard work to achieve his educational goals.

Five years ago, Valdez was unsure of his future, just hanging out with friends in his hometown of Kerrville, Texas. But he must have had an inner vision, however, that the future would be better than his past—if he cultivated it.

Valdez’ mother had died when he was 12 years old. It was a tragedy that seemed to add to the despair he already knew of growing up without the presence of his father, who has

been absent during most of Valdez’ youth. After his mother’s death, young Valdez and his two brothers were homeless, living with friends, and moving a lot.

“Bobby was a quiet young man in his freshman year,” says algebra teacher Daniel de la Pena at Tivy High School in Kerrville. “He was hard-working, bright, and determined. As one of the best long-distance runners in the state, he was proud of his athletic achievements. I wanted him to be equally proud of his scholastic accomplishments.”

“I had never worked in a laboratory,” says Valdez. “It was really different from restaurant work. I made up chemicals, learned the equipment, and isolated DNA from horn flies.”

So de la Pena matched Valdez up with ARS insect physiologist Felix D. Guerrero at the Knipling-Bushland U.S. Livestock Insects Research Laboratory in Kerrville. Valdez developed a liking for biology while working there during the summer of 1995 as a biological aid under ARS’ research apprenticeship program for college-bound high school students.

Guerrero taught Valdez how to isolate and purify DNA from bacteria and to analyze it. “It wasn’t just busywork,” says Guerrero. “What Bobby did really contributed to my research project. If he hadn’t done the lab work, I would have had to do it myself.”

But Valdez had never worked in a laboratory. “It was really different from restaurant work,” he says. “I made up chemicals, learned the equipment, and isolated DNA from horn flies. It was fun, and it paid better than any other job I could have had at the time in Kerrville.”

The relationship was mutually satisfying for both Valdez and his mentor, who had coached two other young people besides him.

“Bobby was very focused on his work. I could see his confidence grow while I worked with him and encouraged him to take other science courses. In his senior year at Tivy, he took an advanced biology class,” says Guerrero.

Valdez hasn’t yet decided on a college major. Perhaps the 12 weeks spent this summer in Guerrero’s lab will influence him to pursue a science degree.

“I’m the first in my family to attend college, and I want to stick with it and complete my degree,” says Valdez, who keeps in close contact with his two brothers. “We try to help motivate one another to a better future.”—By **Linda Cooke**, ARS. ♦

KEN SCHMIDT



The Kerrville, Texas, Independent School District has offered Bobby Valdez a teaching contract option for after he completes his college studies. (K7399-1)